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MARGINAL RELIGION, MARGINAL WOMEN

J. William Frost

Cristine Levenduski. *Peculiar Power: A Quaker Woman Preacher in Eighteenth-Century America.* Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1996. x + 171 pp. Epilogue, notes, bibliography, and index. \$34.95.

Susan Juster. *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics and Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England.* Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994. x + 224 pp. Index. \$37.50.

Elizabeth Ashbridge (1713–1755) is the only eighteenth-century Quaker woman minister whose life story bears resemblances to fictional heroines like Moll Flanders and Pamela, though without any seduction scenes. Ashbridge, born Sampson, the only child of a prosperous English family, eloped at age fourteen with a poor weaver who died five months later. Her father, a ship's doctor who had been absent most of Elizabeth's life, refused to allow her to come home, so she went to live with Irish Quaker relatives. Five years later, Elizabeth met a gentlewoman who turned out to be a shady character and attempted to kidnap her. Her passage to America was marked by Ashbridge warning the captain of a threatened mutiny, but her service brought no escape from what may have been an illegal indenture. Instead, she was overworked, ill fed, and almost stripped and beaten when she told a fellow servant of her supposedly religious master's ill use (perhaps a sexual advance). Because she was a good singer and dancer, she debated becoming an actress. Instead, after buying the last year of indenture through the profits of skilled needlework, she married an itinerate schoolteacher named Sullivan whom she did not love.

From childhood Ashbridge had been religious, wishing to have been a boy so she could be a minister. Raised an Anglican, she had debated and then rejected becoming a Roman Catholic in Ireland, and now engaged in a religious search, visiting many denominations. In spite of her antipathy to Quakers, when welcomed on a visit to Quaker relatives in Pennsylvania, Elizabeth Sullivan found spiritual unity with Friends. Her husband, however, was abusive in his opposition. In time, the Sullivans both became schoolteachers in Mount Holly, New Jersey and she seemed on the way to

converting her husband. Instead, in a drunken fit, he joined the army, but later in the West Indies refused to fight as a conscientious objector. The army disciplined him so severely that he became unfit for service and was returned to the military hospital at Chelsea, where he died. The widow Elizabeth Sullivan continued to teach school and pay off her debts. Here the written narrative ends, although Sullivan lived another twelve years in which she became an influential Quaker minister who traveled in order to preach the faith and married Aaron Ashbridge, a wealthy Pennsylvania farmer. She died on a religious journey to England. Her journal, with a testimonial from her meeting and husband, was published in 1774 and went through several editions.

The heart of Cristine Levenduski's book is an analysis of Ashbridge's diary that was recently reprinted in a critical edition with an introduction by Daniel Shea in *Journeys in New Worlds: Early American Women's Narratives* and has been widely anthologized.¹ Levenduski says Ashbridge's autobiography offers a "synecdoche" into being a widow, an immigrant, an indentured servant, a wife, and a Quaker—all vulnerable and "marginal" roles in early America. The diary is allegedly even more revealing than that of her more famous contemporary and probable acquaintance, John Woolman, because it departs from the normal format of a Quaker journal. And Levenduski is right that Ashbridge's personality and sense of self is most unusual: she was an educated, opinionated woman, who accepted responsibilities for her troubles and yet was victimized by others. The journal makes her both conscious actor, sensitive to her class and poverty, and passive recipient of God's grace. She sought family stability and a "father," but made decisions that brought neither. In a sense she was even responsible for her husband's death, for he accepted the Quaker position on war. She also defied patriarchy as a daughter and a wife. Through all her wanderings, depressions, and persecutions Ashbridge engaged in a religious search that brought her certainty, a public role, and social prestige. Members of all denominations except Quakers proved morally unworthy. Levenduski skillfully focuses on the domestic motifs of otherness and belonging running through the journal. Her book is a valuable guide to a teacher or student seeking to understand the background to this journal or to compare it with Woolman's to find the similarities and differences between male and female Quaker diaries.

Unfortunately, there are major issues posed by the journal not addressed in this book. For example, Ashbridge's account was the second American Quaker woman's journal published. Why did the Quakers print this journal? I would argue that besides being a good story Ashbridge addressed two basic problems confronting the late-eighteenth-century Quaker community: marriage out of unity, i.e. to a non-Quaker, probably because the couple fell in

love, and proof that in a context of religious pluralism only Friends combined moral probity and the correct way to experience God. Ashbridge's journal shows the effects of her irresponsible marriage decisions, the first for love and the second for convenience. It also describes a religious journey in which she found God only in conformity to Quaker quietistic worship, i.e. by complete surrender of the will and mind and apart from any formal worship. Her "convincement," to use the Quaker term, was a gradual process, not a sudden conversion as in the Great Awakening.

The original Quaker community that preserved the document would fault Levenduski for concentrating too much on the outward marks of Quakerism and paying insufficient attention to the inward transformation. Present-day historians would wish that the author had focused more on Ashbridge's role in Quakerism during the time she wrote the narrative. There are no citations of the minutes of the local monthly or women's monthly, quarterly, or yearly meetings. The book uses the published but inadequate version of John Smith's diary rather than the much longer manuscript version. We don't even learn when Ashbridge was recognized as a minister, what kinds of women's meetings she attended, or the extent of her missionary journeys. Considering that the dissertation on the subject was completed in 1989, there was ample time for more investigation.

Because there is so little material in addition to the journal, Levenduski could have focused more on its omissions. There is no discussion of the impact of Ashbridge's being raised by a stepmother but welcomed by her mother's relatives. Omitted is any discussion of Stephen Crisp's letters, which influenced the conversion. Another silent topic is Ashbridge's sexual allure. Here is a female who had no difficulty attracting men; she mentions several proposals of marriage, and dances and sings well enough to go on stage and to attract Sullivan. As a poor but religious twice-widowed woman, she marries a wealthy man; perhaps combining piety and sexuality was irresistible. A crucial topic would be why Ashbridge failed to continue the story after her widowhood and conversion to Quakerism, even though her husband's testimonial indicates she tried to complete her autobiography and many Quaker ministers kept travel diaries. Was her missionary journey to England finally a returning home with wealth and respectability? With so many lacunae in the diary, Ashbridge's silences may be as significant as what she wrote.

Peculiar Power does not hold together well. The introductory chapter on Quaker preachers in New England and the concluding chapter on portraits of Quaker women (not ministers) in nineteenth-century fiction have so little to do with Elizabeth Ashbridge that I wonder if they were added to make a book-length manuscript. The main tie between marginal non-Quaker Anne

Hutchinson and seventeenth-century Quaker women ministers is the negative image of women preachers held by young Elizabeth Sullivan. There is even less linkage between Ashbridge and a few (but by no means all, and we don't learn why these were selected) novelists who pictured Quaker women in contrasting ways (none of whom can be proved to have read Ashbridge's journal). This chapter might better be expanded into a separate monograph on literary views of Quaker women. A better strategy would have been to compare Ashbridge's with other Quaker women's journals, published and unpublished.

In the opening scene of *Peculiar Power*, schoolmaster Sullivan humiliates and reduces to tears his now-Quaker wife by forcing her to dance in a Wilmington, Delaware tavern. Levenduski uses this powerful image to show the marginality of Quakers. But one could as easily use it to show the cultural conflict in families of different religious sentiments or the marginality of tavern culture, because the people with power and money from New England to Delaware would not have approved of a woman dancing in a tavern.

Evocative terms like otherness, marginality, patriarchy, and liminality sometimes blur rather than clarify phenomena, which is what happens in Susan Juster's book, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics and Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England*. It can be read as a sophisticated attempt to apply Juster's interpretation of feminist theory to church history because gender analysis provides a key to understanding religion. Feminine equals marginal; so all marginal groups—the poor, women, working class—are feminine. Femininity means being emotional, porous, ill-defined—or, to summarize, liminality. Liminality also describes being converted; therefore, evangelical religion is liminal, marginal, and feminine. Even sin can become feminine, irrespective of whether done by male or female (so, in theory at least, the “disorderly women” are sometimes male). Being converted is also about language, because the spoken and written word lead a person from a descriptive state of damnation into another of grace and “communitas.”

The message is that historians must engage in a careful analysis of language because language is power. Those scholars who dislike applying feminist theory and semiotics to historical writing and are unwilling to think in such terms should not read this book. Those willing to master the vocabulary will find an intriguing and potentially far-reaching interpretation of revivalism. At the very least it will cause a critical reevaluation of conversion narratives from all periods of American history.

Disorderly Women is based upon a study of conversion narratives and disciplinary records of Baptist and Separating Congregationalist churches from the Great Awakening until 1820. Juster calls these churches “evangelical” and defines the term in such a fashion that Presbyterian, Old Light Congregational, and Methodists are excluded. Also beyond her purview are

formal theology, differences between General and Particular Baptists, religious liberty, and the relation of evangelicals to the Revolution. Even though Juster argues that their status changes within the church, the clergy play only a subordinate role, chiefly as keepers of the documents she relies upon. I wish she had somewhere evaluated the clergy as record keepers because I suspect, though we are not told, that the book rests upon literary analysis of their accounts. Mentioned but ignored as causal factors are economics, class, and war. The commercialism described by Richard Bushman as a factor in the Great Awakening is here dismissed as a material element less important than the "psychological" environment which made the event more "liminal."² Juster also does not focus on pre-1740 Baptist traditions in either England or New England, stressing instead the Puritan background. For example, allowing women to vote in church government, seen as a sign of liminality, may have been traditional practice for Baptists in Rhode Island. Juster plays down any distinction between Baptists in Providence, Rhode Island—who seem since Roger Williams's time to have never been marginal in terms of political and economic power—and those in Connecticut and Massachusetts, who clearly were a powerless minority. Juster's Baptists in New England who seek respectability in the Revolutionary struggle by affirming the dominant culture also bear little resemblance to Rhys Isaac's Virginia Baptists, whose defense of liberty did not require jettisoning their counterculture before and after independence.³

Juster has taken seriously the lament that conventional church history ignores lay women and men. She discovered that while conversion narratives of men and women during the Great Awakening were basically similar, women used more erotic imagery as they sought to be brides of Christ in the family of God. They also had vivid encounters with God and Satan. Men's narratives, by contrast, were more impersonal, focused on community or collective behavior, and stressed the sacraments. Baptist and Separating Congregation Churches proved liminal to New England culture; that is, their discipline was not gender specific and was administered by the whole congregation in a sense of "charity" and not moralism. These churches were more concerned with *communitas* than legalism; so much so that there was considerable laxity over sexual offenses, except where publicity would harm the community of saints. Asserting the equality of saved souls, churches ignored distinctions of wealth and education and allowed all members, including women, to speak and vote. Unfortunately for the welfare of the church, these new converts were also extraordinarily contentious and harmony among the congregation and with the ministers was rare. Juster insists that the indeterminacy of evangelical religion meant a lack of political influence.

As the Revolution approached, the Baptist/evangelical churches sought

respectability as a way of gaining liberty and power. The church no longer viewed itself a *communitas* of saved individual souls, but redefined itself as a patriarchal family with authority going to the minister, who was now a Reverend rather than Elder and spoke from the pulpit above the congregation. The move from marginality to respectability brought the disfranchisement of women from speaking and voting, even though by the late eighteenth century women outnumbered men by two to one. Juster argues that in 1776 the patriots revolted against dependence and subordination (i.e., femininity) and redefined the country and citizenship as male. The Revolution, therefore, brought no improvement in the status of women; it meant only that the patriarchy shifted from the father (king) to the sons (citizens). So the conventional male-centered chronology of American political history which sees an increase of liberty after 1776 distorts the uneven progress of women's rights.

Baptist Churches show a loss of women's power. After 1800 church discipline and conversion bifurcated on gender lines. Sin now meant lapses in morality, rather than in charity. Church discipline, motivated by morality rather than charity, was more rigorously applied to a larger percentage of members. The numbers of men and women disciplined were about equal, but the sins of each sex differed. The church cast out men over doctrinal disputes and specific sinful actions (i.e., a member was drunk in public on a certain date); by contrast, women, identified with Eve and charged with dissembling, were disciplined for character flaws like insubordination, slander, and disorderly walking. New converts, whether male or female, experienced the brunt of the discipline.

Gender in the Second Great Awakening resulted in fundamental differences between how men and women experienced conversion. For women the erotic imagery of being wed to Christ was replaced with finding a friend in Jesus who restored the family. Conversion brought a kind of emancipation, allowing a woman a voice or a moral agency within a circumscribed sphere. Men's conversion narratives used legal terminology as they overcame their unhappiness with the injustice or partiality of God, who saved some but not all. They had to stop questioning God and to accept dependency. Unlike the First Great Awakening, conversion was now often a family affair, with the unsaved husband or wife fearing being separated from a saved spouse. By the 1820s Christian life for converted men and women was an androgynous state in which there was a reintegration of masculine and feminine qualities. Saved women found a way to overcome dependence to gain a role as individuals and men surrendered their individual autonomy to learn to depend on the group. Juster concludes that by 1820 if evangelical religion was still marginal, in spite of its spectacular growth through the revival, male and female converts accepted this condition without protest.

I have not read Baptist records and so am unable to evaluate the accuracy of Juster's exegesis. She frequently uses terms like "subtle" and "speculate" and is very fair in indicating where other scholars disagree with her conclusions on the gendered nature of the evidence. Some of her definitions, like evangelical and marginal, seem arbitrary and are inconsistently applied. Carla Pestana found that Congregational establishment in Massachusetts gave far more legitimacy to Baptists than Quakers.⁴ Juster shows that females had a voice in New Light congregations but that does not prove a lack of male authority. Several times the quotations about disciplinary action support alternate explanations from what Juster provides. Her grasp of theology seems uneven. She argues that New England was "sacred space" and yet claims that having itinerants preach in fields required a redefinition of sacred and profane. Good Calvinists like the Puritans might use a metaphor like "Israel," but they knew that secular events occurred in their meeting houses and made no building or region sacred. Juster makes conversion narratives and disciplinary actions bear an extraordinary weight. The result is a provocative book, but one whose major theses will need more supporting evidence. She has persuaded me that there are major gender and cultural differences between the disciplinary and conversion narratives of the Baptists between 1740 and 1820, but her explanations for these changes imposes an ideology that blurs as much as it clarifies the documents.

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1. William Andrews, ed., *Journeys in New Worlds: Early American Women's Narratives* (1990).
2. Richard Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and Social Order in Connecticut, 1690–1765* (1967).
3. Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill: Institute for Early American Studies by North Carolina University Press, 1982).
4. Carla Pestana, *Quakers and Baptists in Colonial Massachusetts* (1991).